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ABSTRACT

The South Dakota Alliance for Transition establishes a formal partnership among state agencies, local service providers, and community stakeholders to address the transition needs of youth with disabilities. The 5-year federally funded project aims to enhance transition services through systems change: developing responsive case management and integrated transition services at pilot sites; training local school and agency personnel; coordinating services and linking programs; and creating networks for dissemination of information, materials, and services. Pilot projects were begun at four sites: one in the Sioux Falls area and three multicommunity rural sites with large geographic areas and low population densities. During the planning process, site coordinators, community service providers, teachers, community stakeholders, and others identified goals, barriers, and strategies for achieving project aims. The barriers fell into two broad groups: lack of resources and infrastructure typical of rural states and lack of comprehensive planning and coordination. The sites have found that keys to success include identifying and developing positive working relationships with key service providers; a willingness by all partners to work on shared projects; awareness and support of employers, families, and community members; access to training, education, information, and resources related to transition services; and promoting self-advocacy and good case management. (SV)

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THE CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION IN A RURAL STATE

Introduction

Recent educational and policy changes have pushed schools to reexamine their practices on how best to prepare students for the world of employment. President Clinton has talked persuasively about the role of education in building a bridge to the twenty-first century. Since at least 1988 educators and policy makers have focused on the process of transition from school to work and adult life for persons with special needs. Indeed, insuring a successful process of transition is seen as the key to success in employment and adult roles. School personnel, working with families and students are charged with initiating this process, being responsible for initial planning and involving appropriate adult service systems.

Post school follow-up studies have long confirmed that students with disabilities have difficulty transitioning to adult roles that include long term employment, independent living and successful community inclusion. Studies have shown that adults with disabilities are poorer, less likely to be employed and more likely to have an adequate quality of life than others (Chadsey-Rusch, 1991). Youth with disabilities drop out of school more frequently, and their rates of unemployment and under employment far exceed their non-disabled peers. Those who do graduate from secondary education earn less than their counterparts and are not able to secure long-term employment (SDAT, 1995). As an example while 80% of non-disabled students are employed two years after leaving high school, only 58% of mildly disabled students are. More striking is that while 62% of students are making more than minimum wage two years after leaving school, the rate is only 10% for mildly disabled students.

A key to success for disabled students are integrated transition services in order to facilitate the transition process. Repeated studies have shown that while individual services and schools are ready to assist individuals in the transition process, there is a lack of overall coordination between a variety of adult services for persons with special needs. Parents and students, who have become accustomed to working with schools as a single point of service are, upon graduation, faced with a thicket of service options. These services can overlap in their service area and differ in their eligibility and enrollment requirements. Coordination between services has too often been characterized by mis-communication and unnecessary delays. Often at the center of this is the inability of any one person or entity to act as a coordinator of services.

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Recent federal legislation through the School to Work Opportunity Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments has recognized the need for adequate transition planning and mandated that community agencies work together to achieve positive transition outcomes. In 1990 the U.S. Department of Education began an initiative to address these systemic issues involved in the transition process. Beginning as a pilot program and spreading to all states, the Transition Systems Change grants were given to states to increase the coordination of services in the transition from school to work and build capacity within individual states to increase service coordination, enhance employment outcomes, and involve families and students in the process.

Issues Facing Rural States

Largely rural states face unique problems when addressing the transition needs of persons with disabilities leaving school. These problems stem from the nature of the rural economy and infrastructure as well as problems of serving populations over a wide geographic area (Parker, 1991). This results in fewer employment opportunities, a less diverse job market and less service options.

Rural employment conditions have changed in recent years. Most urban areas, especially in the West, have experienced dramatic economic gains in the past few years. The picture in rural America is different. Although recovery from the steep economic decline of the past decade is evident, overall economic growth has been slow. In addition, where growth has occurred it is often characterized by an expansion of lower paid and part time service jobs at the expense of higher wage jobs in mining, agriculture, oil and timber. Growth in jobs in tourism related industries is increasing while traditional rural jobs are declining (Parker, 1991). In addition, many rural states and areas are experiencing a loss of population, further exacerbating this trend. Finally many rural areas have been vulnerable to boom and bust economic cycles, raising expectations for continued economic expansion that never materializes (Dagata, 1993).

A greater problem for persons with disabilities is the lack of infrastructure necessary for delivering transition services. (Arnold, 1997). With many rural counties without public transportation, job training facilities, local community colleges, and human service specialists, individuals with disabilities have severely limited options in seeking supports to make the transition to adult roles.

Rural areas also have distinct advantages and inherent resources. Small towns of rural America allow for an increased involvement of the community in school programs. The links between local schools and local employers are easier to establish and maintain. The sense that everybody knows everyone allows for increased natural supports and family involvement. While these advantages can often feel confining to young adults, they provide and sustain close knit communities.

School to Adult Transitions Project for South Dakota

South Dakota is typical of many rural western states. Approximately 715,000 people live in a state with a land mass of 77,000 square miles. There are approximately 9 people per square mile, however 80% of the population resides in the eastern part of the state, east of the capitol of

Pierre. The rural nature of the state challenges all service providers. Harsh winters, dispersed population, isolation and rural poverty all must be taken into consideration when planning and delivering services.

The State of South Dakota, through the creation of the South Dakota Alliance for Transition (SDAT), is the state systems change project funded through the U.S. Dept. Of Education. This project establishes a formal partnership among state agencies, local service providers and community stakeholders to address the transition needs of youth with disabilities. The project is moving to enhance transition services through systems change by (1) the release of funding to four local sites to develop student and family responsive case management and integrated transition services, (2) the training of local school and agency personnel to enhance transition services, self-determination and advocacy skills, (3) convening and coordinating groups of local providers, advocates and families to implement effective transition services and effective linkage programs; and (4) by creating a network for the dissemination of timely and relevant information, materials and transition services.

This five year project has the intention of changing the focus of teachers and service providers from the short term goals of student high school graduation to the longer term goals of successful transition to adult roles for persons with disabilities. This will be accomplished through a combination of teacher training, cooperative agreements, stream lined application to services and targeted case management. Through activities at three rural and one urban pilot site, these goals will be addressed. The aim of the project is to enhance the employment opportunities and increase the quality of life for youth with disabilities by developing models of community support and integrated services.

Project Pilot Sites

Four sites were identified for the project. The sites are geographically spread across the state and entail three rural sites and one that includes the Sioux Falls area, the only urban area in the state. All of the sites encompass more than one community. The three rural sites are typical of rural areas in the mid-west and west. One site is in an area larger than Connecticut, includes sixteen school districts and twelve towns and cities with a total population of less than 30,000. The two other rural sites reflect the large geographic area and low population density typical of the rural west.

One of the advantages of a state like South Dakota is that the service systems are relatively small. In an early planning meeting, Department of Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, local service providers, protection and advocacy groups, parents and students could easily come together to plan the project. In addition, many of the representatives were heads of their departments and policy makers. Also, many of these individuals were well acquainted with one another and had served together on other projects. Using a PATH planning process, site coordinators, community service providers, teachers, community stakeholders and others identified goals, barriers and a strategy for achieving the aims of the project.

The barriers identified fell into two broad groups; lack of resources and infrastructure typical of

rural states and lack of comprehensive planning and coordination. Barriers identified under lack of resources and infrastructure include transportation, limited job opportunities, lack of post-secondary vocational training, physical isolation and a depressed rural economy.

Lack of comprehensive planning and coordination was attributed to differences in the goals, mandates and funding between school based and adult service programs. Participants in the planning process stated that some transition services were available. These included functional curriculum for acquiring daily living skills, and students receiving job experience by being placed in jobs. However it was felt that these services were fragmented and not consistently applied or well coordinated.

The project sites, have been established to develop model programs, cooperative working agreements, case management strategies and training programs related to transition from school to adult life. Each project site has a site coordinator responsible for improving transition services. Strategies include: improving the procedures regarding the transfer of responsibilities between agencies and secondary and post secondary service providers, improving case management services, promoting self-advocacy and family involvement and disseminating information on employment and service resources. The sites have begun to address these issues on a local level. It is the intention of the project to use these sites as laboratories to develop effective transition services and then to disseminate these practices to the rest of the state.

Successful Transition Strategies

1. Positive Working Relationships

The sites have found that one key to success is to identify and develop close ties to local resources. The site coordinators have found that developing a positive working relationship with key service providers including school personnel, vocational rehabilitation counselors, adult vocational programs, parent groups, employers and other stakeholders is critical. This can not be over stated. What is true elsewhere is especially in rural areas: trust and familiarity count for more than formal pronouncements.

2. Willingness to Work on Shared Projects

Another key to success is the sharing of resources and a willingness to work on shared projects. As sites began to implement their local plans most stakeholders expressed a similar concern. Everyone is juggling a multitude of tasks. A project can be successful if it can be shown that there is a willingness to work common projects. For instance, as an aid to secondary school teachers and service providers a site is holding biannual transition fairs that include employers, service providers, career counselors and others. This meets the need of a number of agencies and allows for expanded options for students and families.

3. Community Buy-In

Working with service providers is not enough. Community support, including, employers, families and students is critical to the success of transition services. The more people that understand the need for transition services, and the willingness of employers to work with service agencies, the more opportunities there will be for students with disabilities. A way of increasing community

support and awareness adopted by the sites is to conduct focus groups in their communities. These focus groups have a dual purpose, informing the community about the project and asking for input on community needs related to transition issues.

4. Training and Education

One of the critical needs in rural areas is access to training, education, information and resources related to transition services. Assessing needs, providing technical assistance, and assisting school teachers and adult service providers with ways to upgrade their skills is seen as an important contribution of the project. In addition, investigating and helping to provide distance education resources in the form of tele-courses, Internet classes and other ways to bring educational resources to rural areas is seen as a plus to local communities.

5. Who's on First

Promoting self-advocacy and good case management is necessary and goes to the heart of the transition dilemma. Modeling good case management, including involving families and students, coordinating services and looking for service gaps, implementing early planning and promoting community involvement helps to show how good services can be provided.

Conclusion

The strategies adopted by the South Dakota Adult Transition project will improve transition services and can serve as a model for transition services in other rural areas. Central to the strategies is a commitment to students with disabilities to become full participating members of their communities and the willingness to think creatively about how to support students and families during this period.

Rural areas face unique challenges in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. An area difficult to address in a project of this type is the need to develop the resources and infrastructure that would make the transition process easier for all students. As a response to this some service providers have abandoned traditional job development and are pursuing community economic development as a strategy for increasing the number and variety of jobs for everyone, including persons with disabilities.

Rural communities can serve as a model for excellent transition services. Accessing resources and information is easier than it has ever been. Building ties between agencies and working out local solutions to local problems has been a hallmark of rural communities.

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